

Strategic Media Management

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Elections are a media spectacle (Kellner, 2009). Political parties, leaders and key figures, can reach a broad mass of voters via television and newspapers and so design communication to appeal to media organisations' logic, producing media friendly images and text and performing for the cameras through a series of pseudo-events (Stromback & Nord, 2006). The numerous policy launches, battle bus tours and visits to hospitals are all designed to capture evening television news headlines and the front pages of the next day's newspapers. However, while media have a mass audience they do not offer a direct channel from campaign to citizen. The accompanying editorial text is beyond the control of the spin doctors who may help writing the words spoken by the politician but ensuring these are disseminated unchallenged is impossible, and for some parties it proves a greater challenge than for others. Hence media management is an important campaigning function, although one largely ignored within political marketing literature (for an exception see Savigny & Temple, 2010). This omission is somewhat bizarre given that in a political context the brand image, values and messages tend to mostly be translated to the wider audience via television and the press (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). This chapter focuses on the relative importance of the leader debates and interviews, the impartial television news and the partisan print media and explores the role mass media played in shaping and translating the marketing strategies of the parties and their leaders into news items for public consumption. The data presented allows us to draw some conclusions as to the relative successes of the various parties' media management strategies.

The role of political public relations

Media management, often referred to as spinning, has evolved significantly from being the relatively simple task of ensuring that the organisation gains public recognition through appearing in media (Botan & Trowbridge, 2015: 357-377). Political parties cannot simply rely on a reactive strategy, assuming their innate newsworthiness. Rather they have to be proactive and strategic (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002). Thus a 21st century media management strategy involves crafting text for press releases, speeches and comments, and events at which speeches or more often soundbites and photo opportunities are delivered in order to ensure these appear in the headlines. Party campaigns must also recognise the various ways in which media publish news, via online and 24/7 channels, via bulletins and updates and when content is determined for the main news bulletins and front pages. Social media has also brought new ways of interacting with journalists, allowing for public complaints, praise and reactions to the work of journalists alongside the traditionally private phone calls and emails. The challenges posed by the hypermedia age (Howard, 2006) are manifold and for campaign media managers to ensure that media coverage conveys positive brand information, painting the party and key individuals in the most positive light, is extremely difficult.

The professionalization of political campaigning has seen political organisations adapting and evolving their communication strategies to maximise impact (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002).

Communications consultants, from advertising, public relations and journalism, have given senior management functions during elections (Gibson & Rommele, 2009) with the function of the . spin doctor being crucial for getting the party message to a critical mass of the electorate. The power dynamics between journalist and spin doctor are complicated, with both journalists and spin doctors being the more powerful at different times and in different places (Meyen et al, 2014).

The most sophisticated campaigns will be planned carefully, soundbites will be crafted and all party representatives will be encouraged to repeat these on news items, press releases,

leaflets, e-newsletters, weblogs and social media posts as well as on the doorsteps they do visit across the UK constituencies. Parties will also have a rapid rebuttal unit to respond instantly to criticisms. The extent to which these elements are evidenced through gaining positive coverage determines the success of a party media management strategy.

Party media priorities

Data from a survey conducted as part of a pan-European study of campaign professionalism (Tenscher et al, 2015), which asked party campaign strategists to rank items one to five on their importance, demonstrates the strategic thinking within the major UK parties. The data is limited as Plaid Cymru did not respond but represents the top three parties, two other national competitors and the SNP who had significant impact upon the campaign and its outcome.

Cumulatively the data shows that media management is a key priority within party campaigning. In terms of central planning we see a gulf between the three major parliamentary parties and the minor parties, UKIP and the Greens. As the SNP campaign only in Scotland and so have a smaller electorate central planning may be simpler regardless.

Aside from the Greens and UKIP, parties see external consultants such as spin doctors as having a crucial role in designing the campaign.

Table 6.1 here

While there are disparities in media analysis, involving measuring coverage and sentiment as well as ensuring rapid rebuttal, all parties agree on the importance of having impact on the media agenda, with five out of the six parties giving it the highest priority. Similarly appearances on national television are the most important form of media appearance, far outweighing free and paid advertising; differences are likely to reflect the chances of party leaders appearing on television. For example, the Greens rarely gain news coverage so see

their television spots as of great importance. Strategically, however, parties concentrate on being in the news, whether that is in the press or on television, and prize being on television. The universal importance given to influencing the media agenda suggests that during a general election campaign spin doctors will work behind the scenes to get journalists 'on side' as well as providing a rich array of imagery and text designed to be instantly usable for news production.

Carefully and cautiously: party media management strategies

Key to impacting the media agenda is gaining positive coverage and for a party's key campaign messages to feature in media coverage, any news is good news and even when challenged or criticised there are opportunities to gain awareness and support. The campaign was essentially one of competing visions, therefore two opposing sets of messages competed for media attention and reportage. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats focused on their achievements in stabilising the economy, the latter arguing austerity would have proved harsher without the Liberal Democrat presence in government. The Conservatives, steered by Lynton Crosby, played on fears of a further economic collapse if they were ousted from office. In an attempt to counter the Conservative message that they could not be trusted with the economy Labour attempted to offer austerity-lite, reducing the national debt but without penalising poorer citizens, the accusation levelled at the coalition government, and raising fears over the future of the NHS. To undermine Labour's challenge the Conservatives emphasised the dangers of a Labour-SNP coalition, demonstrating how parties can change messages in response to feedback on how they are working, and when they it is crucial their spin doctors persuade the media to accept the new terms of reference as the way to cover the election. The other parties argued against austerity measures, with UKIP emphasising its anti-EU, anti-immigration message. While this might appear as two camps both were extremely

divided and each party sought to promote greater differentiation than similarity in their positions.

It perhaps reflects the slightly lower prioritisation by the Conservatives of appearing on the media as well as the general caution evidenced across the campaign, that setting up the leader debates involved protracted negotiations. In the end there were two debates, the first involving all the main contenders: Conservative Cameron, Labour's Miliband, Liberal Democrat Clegg, UKIP's Farage, Bennett of the Green party and Sturgeon and Wood representing the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists respectively; the second debate featured the challengers, excluding David Cameron and Nick Clegg. The build-up was probably hyped more than the events themselves gained coverage. The winners, in terms of gaining popular coverage, were Nicola Sturgeon and Leanne Wood. The debates provided them with a platform to talk to the whole nation. Miliband, arguably, was the loser. As the heir apparent or potential kingmaker given the proximity in opinion polls between Labour and the Conservatives, he faced attacks from the other party leaders particularly as he had rejected discussion of which party he might form a coalition with after outright rejecting a Labour-SNP alliance. Following the first debate it appeared the media agreed Sturgeon emerged the winner, although UKIP leader Nigel Farage's controversial statements across the debates would have appealed to his core vote. One subsequent 'debate' involved the main party leaders appearing separately responding to audience questions. Miliband's claim that the 1997-2010 Labour governments did not overspend was responded to with audible disquiet from the audience, countering his better than expected earlier performances and putting Labour's campaign on the back foot.

The rest of the campaign involved party leaders touring the target seats, providing a series of the visual opportunities for the press pack, though it is questionable whether such visits achieve anything beyond generating coverage (Middleton, 2015). Carefully planned events

were held in empty warehouses and closed car parks where the public were unable to ambush the campaign but the party faithful could be assembled to provide the impression of accessibility (Wring & Ward, 2015). Conservative gaffes were minor; Cameron's noteworthy mistake was appearing to forget which football team he supported. Labour tried a variety of stunts, including Miliband appearing with Russel Brand for his *Trews* YouTube channel and the appearance of his promises carved in stone. Both received much criticism; the latter went from being the 'Edstone' to Miliband's 'Headstone' on Twitter in a matter of hours. These were in many ways the stand out events of the campaign reflecting the safety first approach that Labour only diverted from in the last days.

In order to explore how the media covered the election we draw on Loughborough University data who count instances where topics and issues are covered in news. Their data shows that the news agenda focused largely on the differing coalition opportunities both leaders might have to entertain, with television and press devoting 45.9% and 44.5% of election coverage respectively to what media scholars refer to as the process of the election (Deacon et al, 2015). The second most prominent topic was the economy (8.1% on television, 10.5% in press). The NHS, Labour's flagship topic, was the sixth most mentioned policy area on television, fifth in the press with an average of 3.6% of coverage. Thus Labour's strategy for influencing the news agenda appeared to have proved an abject failure. Equally, as we shall see, Labour's television appearances and attempts to gain publicity outside of the much hyped debate-style programmes largely led to negative coverage suggesting the partisan media deliberately controlled the agenda as opinion polls are pointed to a very close election to influence the outcome. For the other parties it was not so much a hostile media as one that exhibited disinterest.

A question of imbalance

The imbalance in attention to and treatment given to the party leaders draws further on data gathered by Loughborough University Communication Research Centre, here focusing on mentions of the parties and their leaders as well as testing for balance in positive and negative coverage across the media. These data show a stark imbalance which consistently favoured Cameron and the Conservatives and, in particular, undermined Miliband and Labour. It would seem fair to suggest that the media, and in particular the press, set out to ensure a majority Conservative government would be elected. The Loughborough researchers analysed all coverage 30th March to 7 May from television news bulletins (Channel 4 News (7pm), Channel 5 News (6.30pm), BBC1 News at 10, ITV1 News at 10, BBC2 Newsnight, Sky News 8-8pm) and from a spectrum of press outlets (The Guardian, Independent, Times, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail, Daily Express, Mirror, Sun, Star and Metro).

In terms of exposure, television news offered reasonable balance in quoting parties and leaders. The Conservatives gained 30.14%, Cameron 10.48%; Labour 27.98%, Miliband 9.85%; and Liberal Democrats 17.22%, Clegg 8.21% broadly reflecting their standing at the 2010 election; other parties received less coverage with the SNP the next most quoted party and leader Nicola Sturgeon gaining well over half the coverage and 5.74 overall. The imbalance is most visible in the press, Conservatives gaining 44.48%, Cameron 21.95%; Labour 29%, Miliband 13.09%; Liberal Democrats 11.89%, Clegg 8.5%; the SNP lost out to UKIP whose leader, Nigel Farage gained 8.22% of press quotes almost equalling Clegg. In terms of overall appearances in media however, Labour gained 28.7% appearances on television to the Conservatives 27.9%; The Lib Dems lagged on 15.1%, the SNP on 11.1% and UKIP on 9.7%. Press coverage is as imbalanced for mentions as quotations, the Conservatives gained 37.5% of coverage, Labour 31.8%, the Lib Dems 10%, SNP 9% and UKIP 8.3%.

The imbalance in press reporting did not simply concern mentions or quotes however. Across the period of the campaign, when assessing coverage for clear bias on the part of the journalist, the Conservatives gained an average 0.15 positivity score. Labour in contrast average a 0.20 negative score, and although all other parties gain an overall negative average the consistent attacks on Labour are rivalled only by those against the SNP. The SNP received more attacks as the campaign progressed but still only gained a 0.11 negative average for the final week. The anti-SNP narrative originated in Conservative advertisements depicting Labour leader Ed Miliband being the puppet of Alex Salmond, SNP leader in the House of Commons, or in the pocket of Nicola Sturgeon, SNP leader. The perspective of Miliband as weak meant that this fear may have been seen as a reality by many and also played into a further discourse around who governs and what influence the SNP or indeed Scottish MPs in general should have within Westminster.

Of course there were differences by outlet, the Daily Mirror for example promoted the Labour line and consistently encouraged their readers to fear a Conservative majority. But the Mirror, and fellow left-wing newspaper The Guardian, were minority voices and likely talking to the converted anyway. The bias, however, also reflects Miliband's strategy for reaching out to supportive outlets as opposed to attempting to court Murdoch and the Sun as Blair had. Yet we should recognise the difficulties in this. While many media outlets recognised Clegg had won public support following the first leaders' debate in 2010 this was followed by a raft of Conservative inspired negative stories. Therefore Miliband's vacillation in dealing with the hostile press may be understandable. Regardless of potential Labour strategic failures, for the majority who read newspapers, and in particular the three million regular readers of the Sun or Mail, there was a consistent diet of pro-Conservative and anti-Labour propaganda which led veteran leftist journalist Roy Greenslade to tell readers of his

Guardian editorial “the relentless ridicule over the six-week campaign may have played some part in the voting decisions of floating voters” (Greenslade, 2015).

The imbalance in the press was countered by balance across the broadcasters; however Miliband’s failure to emerge triumphant from any of the debates maintained a perspective of Labour and Miliband as unfit to govern. Miliband’s average performances were compounded when he made the news for leaving his crib sheet for the first debate in the dressing room revealing his strategy to appear as a ‘happy warrior’. While having a strategic persona schematic is not surprising, revealing the details gives the impression of fakery. Arguably Miliband also emerged undermined from the solo interview with the BBC’s veteran antagonist Jeremy Paxman. While Miliband’s ‘Hell Yes!’ response to Paxman’s question of are you ready to lead the country was intended to give the impression of credibility, Paxman audibly asking Miliband ‘are you alright?’ after the 30 minute grilling may have given the audience the impression Paxman saw him as unable to take the pressure.

Therefore, overall we find a media interested in their own agenda, which parties might form a coalition being a dominant theme, driven by polls that showed no difference between the parties, and so obsessing with predictions and speculation. Beneath the narrative was that Miliband and Labour were not up to the job of governance, this emerged fleetingly on television broadcasts but was the core message disseminated by those newspapers which might be termed once again the ‘Tory Press’. Essentially the Conservatives and David Cameron were triumphant in marketing themselves via the media, Labour in contrast abjectly failed in this respect. If we accept the findings from research that claim the UK electorate are most likely to gain political information from the mainstream media and if we believe that the media is able to influence voter attitudes towards the parties, their leaders, the leaders’

credibility, and the likelihood of their policies being implemented or having the suggested impact, it may seem surprising that Labour gained as many seats as they did on May 7th.

Market failure or Marketing failure

The question that must be posed is whether Conservative dominance can be attributed to an effective strategy or latent media bias and, if the answer is equivocal, to what extent the responsibility for Conservative success can be attributed to either. The Conservatives had significant advantages. There was evidence their economic strategy was having a positive impact and theirs was a relatively gaffe free campaign performance, so it was an easy and skilfully executed sell. Parties wishing to offer austerity-lite, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, were bound to struggle with message clarity and so required greater resources devoted to media management. The anti-austerity message was clear, though highly contestable and seemingly out of step with a broader majority of 'average' voters. The Conservatives therefore appeared to have the right message, one that resonating with journalists and voters and so had an open door via the media.

But, one cannot negate the alternative perspective that independent of the political context the innate Conservative bias would have been visible. Cameron's links to the Murdoch empire are manifold and personal, so those outlets would be expected to demonstrate a bias. The bias might be even more pronounced following criticisms made publicly of Murdoch by Miliband as well as prominent Liberal Democrats. The anti-Labour narrative was also not simply a feature of the election campaign. Since his election as Labour leader, Ed Miliband allowed himself to be characterised as the man who stabbed his brother in the back to assume the leadership. A long term more negative association was made with the Trade Unions, who assured his victory and led Miliband being given the moniker of 'Red Ed'. Miliband was also depicted as odd looking, with pictures of his contorted expressions while donating to the

homeless, eating a bacon sandwich or listening to a fellow panellist on Loose Women circulated via mainstream media and online. These images, and his similarity in looks to Wallace, the plasticene character in Nick Park's animated films, have been regular fodder for satirical television programmes such as *Have I Got New For You* and cumulatively led to a tarnished brand. The satisfaction rating for Miliband's performance as leader have always lagged behind that of Cameron, the surprising aspect of the polls is that Miliband's performance was not mirrored in declared party support. To what extent the media were reflecting the failure of Labour and Miliband to present an alternative image, or their political bias against Miliband's Labour is a moot point.

Arguably it would seem to be a combination of anti-Miliband and anti-Labour media bias, compounded by having a leader who provided significant ammunition to his opponents. In contrast Cameron maintained a steady course to emerge as the better man for the job.

Miliband's core team appeared to be constituted of media consultants with expertise in print media, though there was no attempt to redress the imbalance in the press. However the lack of television expertise was criticised by some close to the party for not doing more to court television journalists and gain better coverage. Yet, when considering media bias one has to remark that the Liberal Democrats got no easier time and were either positioned as radicals within the coalition or an irrelevance with the issue of broken promises over student tuition fees becoming Clegg's political millstone. The press appeared to be against the idea of a coalition and keen to rid themselves of the junior partner, therefore perhaps political bias explains as much or more of the coverage than purely Miliband's communication failures.

Media effects

If the media provide all or even a majority of the information stored in the memories of voters which will be accessed when required to make a decision then it is likely that the

majority of associations relating to Ed Miliband and Labour were negative. At least in part, this represents a failure of Labour media management strategy. However, as a counter to this one can also argue that, when recognising Labour were not alone in receiving largely negative coverage, the balance of coverage demonstrates the success of Conservative party spin doctors, and the party's relationships with key outlets and their owners, from Cameron becoming party leader over the course of the coalition government. The dominance of the party led to their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, to fail to be able to move beyond the perception of them as having reneged on their election promises in order to build a coalition agreement, Labour and Miliband to face repeated attacks, and to the marginalisation of other parties. The extent to which a party was visible to the audience or not in the media, and whether any positive coverage was received, depended on which specific outlet a citizen relied upon for political news of course. However, for the average person with a low interest in politics who might seek cues as how to cast their vote then the cue provided by the press in particular but also some key aspects of television news coverage was to vote Conservative. But how do we explain this with reference to media effect theory and media management strategy?

Agenda setting is a key function of any media management strategy and involves being able to influence what topics appear in the headlines (Hopman et al, 2012). Labour's strategy was to shift focus from the economy onto the NHS, a policy area which is safe Labour territory. However, it was the Conservative agenda that dominated headlines. Throughout the coalition period, from revealing Labour junior minister Liam Byrne had left a note for his predecessor reading "I'm afraid there is no money" the Conservative's focused on promoting themselves as the party of fiscal responsibility; Labour were dubbed irresponsible and so to blame for the UK's economic collapse. The note became a feature of the campaign as a reminder of the Conservative's narrative, juxtaposed with regular reports of positive economic news kept

public focus on the economy. Byrne himself admitted that his 'joke' had been hugely damaging for Labour's chances in 2015 (Helm, 2015).

The framing of the recession, as Labour's fault, began prior to the 2010 contest and arguably was already in the public consciousness. Framing refers to the way in which an event or issue is defined, according to linguistic scholars it is a rhetorical construction of reality (Foss & Foss, 2011). While there were competing frames, particularly the frame promoted by Labour that it was a global phenomenon and beyond the control of any nation, it would appear the Conservative frame became the most accepted version of events fairly early (ICM, 2008). Labour were unable to contest this frame effectively, or contest the subsequent framing of austerity as necessary. Labour's failure also hindered the challenge made by other parties to the Conservative position.

Perhaps the biggest problem that was faced in challenging the Conservative hegemony over the agenda, or the dominance of the Conservatives in controlling the media, was in gaining a positive image for party leaders Miliband and Clegg. While the hypodermic needle effect, where a perception is repeated by media and subconsciously accepted by their audiences, is largely discredited, arguably the media portrayal of groups through negative stereotypes can lead to increased levels of prejudice (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). Media literacy and education are intervening variables, however when considering many may be media dependent for their understanding of politics and due to low interest pick up simplistic cues to differentiate between parties and their leaders one might expect to find low levels of literacy and interest in relation to media reporting of politics and so higher levels of media influence over attitudes. Therefore it may be possible to reconsider the importance of the hypodermic needle media effect in the context of political communication.

The long term portrayal of Ed Miliband as of the left, under Trade Union control as well as uncharismatic was used to undermine his credibility as a potential prime minister. Similarly

the 'broken promises' narrative that became associated with Nick Clegg is likely to have been responsible for the dramatic collapse in Liberal Democrat support. Without rolling panel studies it is impossible to determine whether the drip feed of negative images and stories led to negative public attitudes being developed and maintained. However, the election winners, the Conservatives and leader David Cameron, enjoyed a more positive media spotlight and so negative associations must have been far lower.

Conclusions

The press were largely pro-Conservative and anti-Labour. The BBC were balanced in their overall coverage levels but at points were equally responsible for undermining Miliband if not promoting Cameron or the Conservatives. BBC documentaries also exposed racists within UKIP and raised questions regarding the SNP's agenda, suggesting at worst a support for a political status quo. While these exposes were outside of mainstream news coverage, one can enquire to what extent BBC News programming also exhibited bias.

The question for media management is, if the media are against you how can a party counter this and earn more positive coverage? Given that a minority use non-traditional news sources for political information, circumnavigating the media and relying on the Internet and social media is not a logical response. The lack of overt bias in television news provides some scope for attempting to influence the agenda, though that scope is limited when balance is paramount. The press and voters usually have firm attitudes at the start of a campaign, and those tend not to change, therefore any efforts within the specific campaign period might be wasted.

Media management therefore must be a long term process. Cameron's team set about framing the economic crisis positively for the Conservatives in 2008, at the 2010 contest there was no

need to try to influence the media agenda, the focus was on the economy regardless, but rather to ensure the media accepted the Conservative framing of the crisis and attribution of blame. The extent to which this influenced the outcome of the 2010 election is of course debatable, particularly given that either the Conservatives or Labour could, in theory, have formed a coalition government. Miliband's election as Labour leader saw minor improvements in economic forecasts allowing the Conservatives to position themselves as competent managers. Miliband, in contrast, was positioned as Cameron's non-telegenic, awkward and ultimately unelectable opponent. The extent to which there were behind the scenes briefing to sympathetic journalists by Conservative spin doctors is unknown with any certainty, though this is argued to be common practice (MacBride, 2015), but both Labour and the Liberal Democrats were painted in a negative light over the course of the coalition government. The election involved only reinforcing those negatives, and the negative aspect of the Conservative communication strategy was sufficiently effective to counter any Labour resurgence. Alternative frames of a potential coalition were not considered, only the danger of the SNP controlling Miliband's Labour; alternative perspectives of Miliband were rarely offered; Clegg was largely marginalised. A favourable press gave Cameron's Conservatives a direct link with their audiences, branding his party as competent managers. Perhaps the election result demonstrates the importance of the media, having the media on side, and having a sound and long-term media management strategy. Arguably if the media is against a party, any party branding strategy is sure to be blown off course, the question is was it just too easy to undermine Labour?